

Chapter Eighteen -- Blood and Thunder

It was while we were livin' in Ohio that we first found out how people really feel about the mountains of Kentucky. We had just moved there, an' were gettin' to know our neighbors when we met Jim Haskins.

Jim was a meek little man with a sad face that was made sadder by a droopy moustache. He came over the day we moved in, to borrow a post-hole digger, an' to impress the new teacher with how much he knew.

"Now, Mr. Swetnam," he told Father, "you'll find that none uh these fellers around there know anything about politics. But I know all about 'em. I sent down to Washington an' got a testicle, that tells all about politics."

Father assured him with a straight face that it must be nice to have a testicle, an' we never did find out what Haskins was really talkin' about, if he wasn't just talkin' through his hat.

They talked on a while, an' something was said about the mountains of Kentucky. Mr. Haskins turned pale at the word, an' gasped out: "God! I don' wanta go there!"

Father didn't say anything, an' it wasn't for a week or two that Jim found out we had come right out of the feud country. After that he just quaked in his shoes when he saw Father comin'. If Dad had been a roarin' lion, Jim Haskins couldn't have been any more afraid of him.

Mountain Kentucky has had a sort of reputation for feudin', but really, so long as a man minds his own business, I don't know any place in the world where he'll be better treated. I've been shot at twenty seven times, but most of it wasn't in the mountains, an' all of it was for exactly the same reason: Either I was gettin' into some place I hadn't any business to be, or else I hadn't taken pains to let my business there be known.

When you go into the mountains or any part of the back woods, just take your time. An' when you meet up with one of the natives, just go ahead an' be open an' talk to him. If you've got business, let it be known, even if it's just monkey business. They'll understand, an' you'll get along all right.

Of course, if you're comin' to see some gal, her feller may feel like takin' a pot shot at you, but that's better than havin' a lot of people doin' the same thing. An' I never could see that the mountaineers had any patent on that. I guess men kill from jealousy in the city just same as in the hills.

For the rest, just because a man has killed one or two people, it doesn't make him a bad or a dangerous man. I guess there never was a handier man with a gun than Devil Anse Hatfield was durin' the Hatfield-McCoy feud. But afterwards, when we lived on the farm next to Devil Anse while he was stayin' out of trouble down in Greemup County, we never had a better neighbor.

Maybe we've just had better singers to make our feuds sound big. People sing about the Hatfields an' McCoy's, but they never do sing about St. Valentine's Day massacres. Yet I can't recall any day in any mountain feud when a dozen unarmed men were lined up an' shot down.

We started singin' about our bad men a long way back, so far back I don't even know the first name of the man we sang about. In the hills we just called it the "Vance Song", an' it had a good tune, an' some of the words were right pretty. It's one of the first songs I can remember hearin', an' was about things that happened right around home, up in the Big Sandy Valley.

Green are the woods where Sandy flows,
 An' peace dwells in the vales.
 The bears they lie in the laurel groves,
 An' the red buck roves the hills.
 But Vance no more shall the Sandy behold,
 Nor drink of its crystal wave.
 The landthiff judge has pronounced his doom,
 An' the hunter has found his grave.
 The friendship that has been shown to others,
 Has never been shown to me.
 Humanity still belongs to the brave,
 An' yet it remains with me.
 I killed a man, I don't deny,
 He said that he would kill me.
 But the blood that was shed on Calvary's hill,
 Washes all my sins away.

There was always a pretty sharp dispute between the Stafford an' Swetnam kin over the truth about Vance. Mother said he was a Baptist preacher that was hung for killin' a man that had threatened him, as the song says. But Father said he was an old reprobate

who thought just because he was one of the first settlers he could do anything he pleased an' get away with it.

Those were the days when a lot of people felt that way, an' my father, even though he was born durin' the War, could remember the time when the strongest feller in any region was the "bully", an' anybody that came along had to take what he said, or fight him. It was a big thing to lick the bully, an' we learned an old song about it that ran:

I'm lookin' for that bully,
 Bully of the town.
 I'm lookin' for that bully;
 That bully makes me frown.
 Lookin' for the bully of the town.

It had a bully tune, too.

Maybe it was old fashioned an' all that, but we grew up with a feelin' that a man had to be pretty trashy not to fight, if he had to, to defend what was his own, an' what were his rights.

Come down to it, that's what most of the big feuds were about: One side would get a holt of the law, an' start usin' it for private purposes against the other. Then, without money for judges an' appeals, there wasn't much to appeal to but powder an' lead. It worked all right, too.

That's how the Hatfield-McCoy trouble got to the feud stage. They'd fallen out over some little thing, an' it kept gettin' worse. But the Hatfields had pretty good control over in Logan County, on the Tug Fork of Big Sandy, an' when one of the Hatfield constables tried to arrest some McCoy's, all Hell broke loose. But

that was too far away for us to have any certain knowledge of it.

We never could understand, either, all the fuss that was raised about chain gangs. I think the prisoner in the chain gangs I've seen (I have to admit I never was on one) is at least as well treated as in jails I've been in. We never could figure it did a felon any harm to do some good, useful work in the roads, an' we never felt any special sympathy for the man that sang:

Oh, fare you well, my Susan;
I cannot long remain.
I'm gwine to Old Virginny,
To wear the ball an' chain.

My oldest brother, Ernest, ran into a right funny incident, though, in his early days of preachin' down in Georgia, where he's still in the Methodist conference.

He was full of fire an' ginger, an' decided to go down an' convert some of the fellers on the chain gang. One of them was a boy that played a guitar an' sang just like an' angel, especially "Home, Sweet Home". He told Ernest he'd been on the chain gang three years, an' had a wife an' two young'uns.

"Now, Joe," Ernest told him. "You're about ready to get out. And when you do, I want you to take your guitar and go home and sing "Home, Sweet Home" to your wife, just like you did to me."

Joe promised. But it wasn't long after he got out that Ernest found him back on the chain gang, for beatin' up his wife.

"Did you go home and sing your wife "Home, Sweet Home", like you promised?" Ernest asked him.

"No, suh," Joe confessed. "You see, boss, when I got there,

my wife had four babies, stead uh two, an' they wasn't twins. So
I just sang her:

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"Who's been here sence I been gone?

Who's been here sence I been gone?

Who's been here sence I been gone?

Great big nigger with a derby on."